

Grounds on Which Colored People Protest Against "The Birth of a Nation"

Editor Tacoma Ledger: At a recent mass meeting held at the African Methodist church by the colored citizens to protest against the production in Tacoma of the film, "The Birth of a Nation," the writer was elected the secretary of the meeting, and was instructed to write a letter to the press correcting erroneous statements being circulated concerning the "Birth of a Nation."

Wherever this film has appeared in the north in cities where a certain number of colored people reside, a protest has been made against the showing of the film. A protest was made in Seattle by the Seattle branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, but there was no city ordinance against obscene and immoral shows, hence the protest was futile.

At Portland, where the books of Tom Dixon are not permitted in the city library, a rigorous protest was made. Letters were published in the Daily Oregonian and the Journal protesting against the film being shown. At Spokane a battle royal was fought over the film. The people were exercised there about the production of the film as they have never been exercised about anything else. The councilman who first permitted the film to show at Spokane, was by a rigorous campaign by the colored people, defeated at the polls for re-election.

Several weeks ago when the "Birth of a Nation" returned for a second performance the city council objected to its exhibition along some lines. The matter got into the courts but the judge sustained the action of the city council.

I was in Oakland, Cal., last year during the time the infamous film was being shown. Great excitement prevailed among the better class of white people, including the G. A. R. post. Protest meetings were held all over the city by white, as well as colored people. White ministers opened the doors of their churches to the public and preached powerful sermons against the immoral film. Two and three mass meetings were held the same evenings. The newspapers were filled with letters from indignant people.

During the first performance of the film it was said the colored people were going to make a raid on the film machinery. Great crowds of angry people congregated around the theater where the film was being shown. It was said that the manager of the theater refused to sell tickets to colored persons. I was never before in the midst of so much excitement. Lawyers were trying to get an injunction against the film, but nothing seemed to be able to stop the exhibition, because there was no city ordinance against objectionable shows.

I had no desire whatever to see the play, but friends, knowing that I was a representative of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, urged me to reconsider the matter and see the show. Foreseeing the film would finally attempt to show in Tacoma, and the force of the argument just referred to, I decided to see the film. It was well that I saw it, for one of the first questions that was put to me when I appeared last year before the city council of Tacoma: "Have you seen the photo-film?" "I have," said I. It might not be amiss to express how the play impressed and affected me.

The first part of the film went fairly well. The scenario was beautiful; the folk songs rendered by colored singers were typically southern. I did not enjoy the assassination of Lincoln; it was gruesome and cruel. The war scenes were spectacular but painful to the heart. All along I wondered from what history Dixon and Griffith studied.

The northern people were belittled and slandered, especially the Hon. Thaddeus Stevens. I wondered how the northern whites could stand for that; and thru the battle scenes there is sinister style caricaturing the Union army and the Union soldiers and particularly the absolutely unfounded scenes calculated to impress the auditor that, during recon-

struction times negro soldiers freely plundered and abused the white people of the south, and were upheld in this by their white officers. I never saw a history that recorded such things. 'Twas plain Tom Dixon had deliberately lied to create prejudice against the black man. Why should the white Union army stand for such slander, perjury, libel?

I had considered myself broad-minded, free from prejudice, either as to race or religion, but my intelligence began to resent the circumstantial evidence that was slowly being woven around the white and colored heroes of the infamous play.

One cannot help resenting the approach of Gus the rapist upon the innocent Cameron girl. (Here is where Dixon displays the method of his madness.) Her effort to escape—her leap over the precipice to her death below. Gus is given the character of a brute in human form. The scenes that follow the tragedy are sad and impressive. The trial and execution of Gus is the natural outcome of the rape incident. The so-called smell scene is truly Dixonian.

The library scene between Stoneman (Thaddeus Stevens) and his colored mistress, is unsavory. The entire scene of Lynch to force the hand of the daughter of his benefactor in marriage is outrageous. No such thing ever occurred, save in the fertile imagination of Tom Dixon—twin brother of Beelzebub. He was weaving a net of prejudice as artfully as a spider weaves his web to catch flies.

The effusive scenes of the colored men in the legislature fitted well into the plot of the black and white, of Arvan and African races. The rape scene, the intermarriage affair, the demoralized negro soldiers—the insolence of the freemen—all pave the way for the advent of the notorious clansmen, who now come galloping over the screen by the hundreds. Like a clap of thunder the applause breaks upon the ear. My blood was at the white heat point. Instantly I began to hiss in my feeling of resentment at the series of infamous lies. People turned around and stared at me, but I had lost my equilibrium; I was in a fighting mood. My sister who accompanied me, strove to quiet me, but without avail; but happily the end was near and we filed out.

Just an historical word about the Klu-Klux Klan. Not in all the eight hundred and thirty-two (832) pages of testimony and argument in these York county cases is any crime against white women mentioned.

Quite in passing and as though it were the commonest thing in the world, witnesses speak of the murder and mistreatment of negro women and girls by members of the Klan. These crimes, the records indicate, were not prompted by low desires that are mirrored on the animal face of the negro "Gus" in the "Birth of a Nation." They were committed as a punishment on husbands and fathers who voted the wrong ticket.

The Rev. Dr. Crothers says, speaking of the "Birth of a Nation," "It is not a work of art for art's sake, to be so enjoyed; it is not history as an impartial historian understands history. It is a deliberate and skillful bit of treachery."

In the Survey Joseph Lee writes: "Is lynching negroes immoral? That seems to be the question raised by the approval of the Klu-Klux and anti-negro features of the 'Birth of a Nation' film. Appealing to the strongest race prejudice in the most vivid possible way, at the precise point where it has led to wholesale murder in the south, is, of course, an incitement to continued murder."

Jacques Loeb calls the play an "insult," and a "glorification of homicidal mania."

No one can witness the production of the "Birth of a Nation" and be the same as before he saw it. No city can afford to have the equilibrium of its people disturbed.

Yours very truly,
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